



1 (b) a judge meets the certification standards under [section 7], but the presumption, described in  
2 [section 5(5)(b)(i)], that the judge meets or exceeds minimum performance standards is overcome by  
3 substantial countervailing evidence.

4 (6) "Impartiality means a principle of justice holding that decisions must be based on objective  
5 criteria.

6 (7) "Inferable bias" means when the appearance of bias becomes evident through comments,  
7 facial expressions, and disparaging comments. Inferable bias includes when a judge:

8 (i) falsely uses the law, twists the law, or purposely ignores a law or judicial decision to achieve a  
9 desired outcome;

10 (ii) decides a case in which the judge is a party or has an interest;

11 (iii) has experience, beliefs, or opinions that would influence, despite the judge's subjective  
12 objections, the judge's ability to be impartial;

13 (iv) develops a pattern of committing violations of 1-2-101, 1-2-102, or 1-2-104; and

14 (v) does not use the plain language doctrine in communication and does not interpret words and  
15 phrases in the common understanding of the time when the words were used or written.

16 (8) "Judge" means a district court judge or a supreme court justice.

17 (9) "Meets or exceeds minimum performance standards" means that:

18 (a) (i) a judge meets the certification standards under [section 7]; and

19 (ii) the presumption that the judge meets or exceeds minimum performance standards, described  
20 in [section 5(5)(b)(i)], is not overcome by substantial countervailing evidence; or

21 (b) a judge does not meet the certification standards under [section 7], but the presumption  
22 described in [section 5(5)(b)(ii)], that the judge does not meet or exceed minimum performance standards, is  
23 overcome by substantial countervailing evidence.

24 (10) "Open-mindedness" means a willingness to:

25 (a) consider opposing views and alternative solutions to civil conflicts between parties;

26 (b) remain open to persuasion when issues arise in a pending case that may go against a judge's  
27 views;

28 (c) go against stare decisis and precedent;

- 1 (d) concede that the appearance of bias and prejudice has been shown; and
- 2 (e) treat each case independently based on the evidence and testimony presented.

3

4 **NEW SECTION. Section 3. Judicial performance evaluation commission -- appointment --**

5 **members -- quorums [will be codified in Title 2, chapter 15, part 10].** (1) There is a judicial performance  
6 evaluation commission. The commission consists of 11 members as follows:

7 (a) three members appointed by the president of the senate, including one retired district court  
8 judge;

9 (b) three members appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives, including only one  
10 member of the state bar of Montana;

11 (c) three members appointed by the governor, including only one member of the state bar of  
12 Montana; and

13 (d) two members appointed by the members of the supreme court, including only one member of  
14 the state bar of Montana.

15 (2) A sitting legislator or a sitting judge may not serve as a commission member.

16 (3) (a) A commission member appointed under subsection (1) serves a 4-year term.

17 (b) A member may not serve more than three consecutive terms.

18 (c) When a vacancy occurs in the commission for any reason, the replacement must be appointed  
19 for the unexpired term by the same appointing authority that appointed the member creating the vacancy.

20 (4) The commission shall elect a chair from among its members.

21 (5) (a) Seven members of the commission constitute a quorum.

22 (b) The action of a majority of the quorum constitutes the action of the commission, except that the  
23 commission may not make a determination that a judge meets or exceeds minimum performance standards, or  
24 that a judge does not meet or exceed minimum performance standards, with a vote of less than five members.

25 (c) If, because of absences, the commission is unable to make a determination described in  
26 subsection (5)(b) with at least five votes, the commission may meet a second time to make a determination.

27 (d) If a vote on the question of whether a judge meets or exceeds minimum performance  
28 standards or does not meet or exceed minimum performance standards ends in a tie or does not pass with at

1 least five votes, the record shall reflect that the commission made no determination in relation to that judge.

2 (6) The commission shall provide recommendations to the Legislature regarding the commission's  
3 budget and if the judicial performance evaluation program should be expanded to other courts.

4  
5 **NEW SECTION. Section 4. Salary and expenses -- staff [will be codified in Title 2, chapter 15,**  
6 **part 10].** (1) A commission member may not receive compensation or benefits for the member's service. A

7 commission member may receive per diem and travel expenses as provided in Title 2, chapter 18, part 5.

8 (2) The commission shall employ an executive director and may employ additional staff as  
9 necessary within budgetary constraints.

10 (3) The commission is allocated to the department of administrative for administrative purposes  
11 only as prescribed in 2-15-121, except that the provisions of 2-15-121(2)(d) do not apply [this exception allows  
12 the commission to hire its own staff].

13  
14 **NEW SECTION. Section 5. Judicial performance evaluations -- rulemaking [codify in Title 3].** (1)  
15 Beginning with the 2026 judicial elections, the commission shall prepare a performance evaluation for:

16 (a) each district court judge in the third and fifth year of the judge's term; and

17 (b) each justice of the Montana Supreme Court in the third and seventh year of the justice's term.

18 (2) Except as provided in subsection (4), the performance evaluation for a judge under subsection  
19 (1) may only consider the information contained in subsection (3). The performance evaluation must give  
20 primary emphasis to the information that is gathered and relates to the performance of the judge during the  
21 period subsequent to the last judicial election of that judge or, if the judge has not had a judicial election, during  
22 the period subsequent to the judge's appointment as a judge and applicable to the judge's first judicial election:

23 (3) The information a performance evaluation must consider is as follows:

24 (a) the results of the judge's most recent judicial performance survey that is conducted by a third  
25 party in accordance with [section 6];

26 (b) information concerning the judge's compliance with certification standards established in  
27 accordance with [section 7];

28 (c) courtroom observation;

- 1 (d) the judge's judicial disciplinary record, if any;
- 2 (e) public comment solicited by the commission;
- 3 (f) information from an earlier judicial performance evaluation concerning the judge except that the
- 4 commission shall give primary emphasis to information gathered subsequent to the last judicial election; and
- 5 (g) any other factor that the commission:
- 6 (i) considers relevant to evaluating the judge's performance for the purpose of an election; and
- 7 (ii) establishes by rule made in accordance with Title 2, chapter 4.
- 8 (4) The commission shall make rules concerning the conduct of courtroom observation under
- 9 subsection (3), which must include the following:
- 10 (a) who may perform the courtroom observation;
- 11 (b) whether the courtroom observation must be performed in person or may be performed by
- 12 electronic means; and
- 13 (c) a list of principles and standards used to evaluate the behavior observed.
- 14 (5) (a) As part of the evaluation conducted under this section, the commission shall do one of the
- 15 following:
- 16 (i) determine, by a vote of at least five members, that the judge meets or exceeds minimum
- 17 performance standards;
- 18 (ii) determine, by a vote of at least five members, that the judge does not meet or exceed minimum
- 19 performance standards;
- 20 (iii) determine, by a majority vote, that the information concerning the judge is insufficient to make a
- 21 determination described in subsection (5)(a)(i) or (ii); or
- 22 (iv) fail to make a determination described in subsection (5)(a)(i), (ii), or (iii) by the number of votes
- 23 required for one of those determinations.
- 24 (b) (i) If a judge meets the certification standards established in accordance with [section 7], there
- 25 is a rebuttable presumption that the judge meets or exceeds minimum performance standards.
- 26 (ii) If a judge fails to meet the certification standards established in accordance with [section 7],
- 27 there is a rebuttable presumption that the judge does not meet or exceed minimum performance standards.
- 28 (c) If the commission deviates from a presumption described in subsection (5)(b), the commission

1 shall provide a detailed explanation of the reason for that deviation in the commission’s report under [section 8].

2 (d) If the commission makes the determination described in subsection (5)(a)(iii) or fails to make a  
3 determination described in subsection (5)(a)(i), (ii), or (iii) by the number of votes required for those  
4 determinations, the commission shall note that fact in the commission’s report.

5 (6) (a) The commission shall allow a judge who is the subject of a judicial performance evaluation  
6 and who has not passed one or more of the certification standards on the evaluation to appear and speak at  
7 any commission meeting during which the judge’s judicial performance evaluation is considered.

8 (b) The commission may invite any judge to appear before the commission to discuss concerns  
9 about the judge’s judicial performance.

10 (c) The commission may meet in a closed meeting to discuss a judge’s judicial performance  
11 evaluation by complying with Title 2, chapter 3, part 2.

12 (d) (i) A member of the commission, including a member of the state bar of Montana, may not be  
13 disqualified from voting under subsection (5) solely because the member appears before the judge as an  
14 attorney, a fact witness, or an expert, unless the member is a litigant in a case pending before the judge.

15 (ii) Notwithstanding subsection (6)(d)(i), a member of the commission shall disclose any conflicts  
16 of interest with the judge being reviewed to the other members of the commission before the deliberation and  
17 vote.

18 (iii) Information disclosed under this subsection (6) is confidential.

19 (7) (a) If the Montana supreme court issues a public sanction of a judge after the commission  
20 makes or fails to make a determination described in subsection (5), but before the publication of the voter  
21 information pamphlet in accordance with 13-27-401, the commission may reconsider the commission’s action.

22 (b) The commission shall invite the judge described in subsection (7)(a) to appear before the  
23 commission during a closed meeting for the purpose of reconsidering the commission’s action.

24 (c) The judge described in subsection (7)(a) may provide a written statement, not to exceed 150  
25 words, that shall be included in the judge’s evaluation report.

26 (d) The commission shall include in the judge’s evaluation report:

27 (i) the date of the reconsideration;

28 (ii) any change in the action of the commission; and

1 (iii) a brief statement explaining the reconsideration.

2 (e) The commission shall:

3 (i) submit revisions to the judge's evaluation report to the secretary of state no later than August  
4 31 of a regular general election year for publication in the voter information pamphlet; and

5 (ii) publish the revisions on the commission's website and through any other means the  
6 commission considers appropriate and within budgetary constraints.

7 (8) (a) The commission shall compile a midterm report of the commission's judicial performance  
8 evaluation of a judge.

9 (b) The midterm report of a judicial performance evaluation must include information that the  
10 commission considers appropriate for purposes of judicial self-improvement.

11 (c) The commission shall provide the midterm report to the evaluated judge, the Montana supreme  
12 court, and the court administrator.

13 (d) (i) The commission may provide a partial midterm evaluation to a judge whose appointment  
14 date precludes the collection of complete midterm evaluation data.

15 (ii) For a newly appointed judge, a midterm evaluation is considered partial when the midterm  
16 evaluation is missing a respondent group, including attorneys, court staff, court room observers, or intercept  
17 survey respondents.

18 (iii) A judge who receives partial midterm evaluation data may receive a statement in  
19 acknowledgment of that fact on the commission's webpage.

20 (iv) On or before the beginning of the evaluation cycle, the commission shall inform the court  
21 administrator of the name of any judge who receives a partial midterm evaluation.

22 (9) The commission shall identify a judge whose midterm evaluation:

23 (a) fails to meet certification standards in accordance with [section 7] or as established by rule; or

24 (b) otherwise demonstrates to the commission that the judge's performance would be of such  
25 concern if the performance occurred in an evaluation that the judge would be invited to appear before the  
26 commission in accordance with subsection (6)(b).

27 (10) The commission may make rules in accordance with Title 2, chapter 4, as necessary to  
28 administer the evaluation required by this section.

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**NEW SECTION. Section 6. Judicial performance survey -- rulemaking.** (1) A third party under contract to the commission shall conduct, on an ongoing basis during the judge's term in office, the judicial performance survey required by [this section] concerning a judge who is subject to an election. **The third party may not be affiliated with a legal firm or a legal professional.**

(2) (a) The judicial performance survey must include as respondents a sample of each of the following groups as applicable:

- (i) attorneys who have appeared before the judge as counsel;
- (ii) jurors who have served in a case before the judge; and
- (iii) court staff who have worked with the judge.

(b) Only a respondent under subsection (2)(a)(i) who is admitted to practice law in the state and in good standing with the state bar of Montana may evaluate a judge's legal ability under subsection (7)(a).

(3) The commission may include an additional classification of respondents if the commission:

- (a) considers a survey of that classification of respondents helpful to voters; and
- (b) establishes the additional classification of respondents by rule.

(4) All survey responses are confidential, including comments included with a survey response.

(5) If the commission provides information to a judge or the court administrator, the commission shall provide the information in such a way as to protect the anonymity of a survey respondent.

(6) A survey must be provided to a potential survey respondent within 30 days of the day on which the case in which the person appears in the judge's court is closed, exclusive of any appeal, except for court staff and attorneys, who may be surveyed at any time during the survey period.

(7) Survey categories must include questions concerning a judge's:

- (a) legal ability, including the following:
  - (i) demonstration of understanding of the substantive law and any relevant rules of procedure and evidence;
  - (ii) attentiveness to factual and legal issues before the court;
  - (iii) adherence to precedent and ability to clearly explain departures from precedent;
  - (iv) grasp of the practical impact on the parties of the judge's rulings, including the effect of delay



1 and increased litigation expense;

2 (v) ability to write clear judicial opinions;

3 (vi) ability to clearly explain the legal basis for judicial opinions; and

4 (b) judicial temperament and integrity, including the following:

5 (i) demonstration of courtesy toward attorneys, court staff, and others in the judge’s court;

6 (ii) maintenance of decorum in the courtroom;

7 (iii) demonstration of judicial demeanor and personal attributes that promote public trust and

8 confidence in the judicial system;

9 (iv) preparedness for oral argument;

10 (v) avoidance of impropriety or the appearance of impropriety;

11 (vi) avoidance of a conflict of interest or inferable bias involving an issue or a party;

12 (vii) display of fairness, open-mindedness, and impartiality toward all parties and issues; and

13 (viii) ability to clearly communicate, including the ability to explain the basis for written rulings, court

14 procedures, and decisions;

15 (c) administrative performance, including the following:

16 (i) management of workload;

17 (ii) sharing proportionally the workload within the court or district; and

18 (iii) issuance of opinions and orders without unnecessary delay; and

19 (d) fidelity to:

20 (i) the Montana constitution

21 (ii) Article III, section 1, of the Montana constitution; and

22 (iii) sections 1-2-101 and 1-2-102 of the Montana code annotated.

23 (8) If the commission determines that a certain survey question or category of questions is not

24 appropriate for a respondent group, the commission may omit that question or category of questions from the

25 survey provided to that respondent group.

26 (9) (a) The survey must allow respondents to indicate responses in a manner determined by the

27 commission, which must be:

28 (i) on a numerical scale from one to five; or

1 (ii) in the affirmative or negative, with an option to indicate the respondent's inability to respond in  
2 the affirmative or negative.

3 (b) (i) To supplement the responses to questions on either a numerical scale or in the affirmative or  
4 negative, the commission may allow respondents to provide written comments.

5 (ii) The commission's executive director may not provide the commission a comment that would be  
6 prohibited in relation to taking an employment action under federal or state law.

7 (10) The commission shall compile and make available to each judge that judge's survey results  
8 with each of the judge's judicial performance evaluations.

9 (11) The commission may make rules as necessary to administer the judicial performance survey.

10  
11 **NEW SECTION. Section 7. Certification standards -- rulemaking.** (1) The commission shall  
12 establish certification standards requiring that:

13 (a) the judge has not received a public sanction issued by the Montana supreme court during the  
14 judge's current term; and

15 (b) the judge receive a minimum score on the judicial performance survey as follows:

16 (i) an average score of no less than 65% on each survey category as provided in [section 6(7)];

17 and

18 (ii) if the commission includes a question on the survey that does not use the numerical scale, the  
19 commission shall establish the certification standard for all questions that do not use the numerical scale to be  
20 substantially equivalent to the standard required under subsection (1)(b)(i).

21 (2) The commission may establish an additional certification standard if the commission by at least  
22 two-thirds vote:

23 (a) determines that satisfaction of the standard is necessary to the satisfactory performance of the  
24 judge; and

25 (b) adopts the standard.

26 (3) The commission may make rules in accordance with, to establish a certification standard.

27  
28 **NEW SECTION. Section 8. Publication of the judicial performance evaluation.** (1) (a) The

1 commission shall compile a report of the commission's judicial performance evaluation of a judge.

2 (b) The commission shall provide the report of a judicial performance evaluation nearest the  
3 judge's next scheduled election to the judge at least 45 days before the last day on which the judge may file a  
4 declaration of the judge's candidacy in the election.

5 (c) A report prepared in accordance with subsection (1)(b) and information obtained in connection  
6 with the evaluation becomes a public record on the day following the last day on which the judge who is the  
7 subject of the report may file a declaration of the judge's candidacy in the judge's scheduled election if the  
8 judge declares the judge's candidacy for the election.

9 (d) Information collected and a report that is not public under subsection (1)(c) is considered  
10 confidential.

11 (2) Within 15 days of receiving a copy of the commission's report under subsection (1)(b):

12 (a) a judge who is the subject of an unfavorable action under [section 5(5)] may:

13 (i) provide a written response to the commission about the report; and

14 (ii) request an interview with the commission for the purpose of addressing the report; and

15 (b) a judge who is the subject of a favorable action under [section 5(5)] may provide a written  
16 response to the commission about the commission's report.

17 (3) (a) After receiving a response from a judge in any form allowed by subsection (2), the  
18 commission may meet and reconsider the commission's action.

19 (b) If the commission does not change the commission's action, the judge may provide a written  
20 statement, not to exceed 150 words, that must be included in the commission's report.

21 (4) The report of a judicial performance evaluation must include:

22 (a) the results of the judicial performance survey, in both raw and summary form;

23 (b) information concerning the judge's compliance with the certification standards, including stating  
24 how many of the certification standards the judge met;

25 (c) information concerning any public discipline that a judge has received that is not subject to  
26 restrictions on disclosure under Title 3, chapter 1, part 11;

27 (d) a narrative concerning the judge's performance;

28 (e) the commission's determination under [section 5(5)];

- 1 (f) the number of votes for and against a determination described in [section 5(5)]; and  
2 (g) any other information the commission considers necessary to include in the report to explain  
3 the certification standards and the determination or lack of a determination made.
- 4 (5) (a) The commission may not include in the commission's report specific information concerning  
5 an earlier judicial performance evaluation.
- 6 (b) The commission may refer to information from an earlier judicial performance evaluation  
7 concerning the judge in the commission's report only if necessary to explain performance in the current  
8 reporting period and giving primary emphasis to the information gathered during the current reporting period.
- 9 (6) The commission shall make the report of the judicial performance evaluation publicly available  
10 on the internet and may make the report publicly available through other means within budgetary constraints.
- 11 (8) The commission shall provide a summary of the judicial performance evaluation for each judge  
12 to the secretary of state for publication in the voter information pamphlet required by 13-27-401.
- 13 (9) The commission shall provide the court administrator with:  
14 (a) the judicial performance survey results for each judge; and  
15 (b) a copy of each judicial performance evaluation.

16  
17 **Section 9.** Section 3-1-1124, MCA, is amended to read:

18 **"3-1-1124. Disclosure for judicial selection -- appointment or assignment -- judicial**  
19 **performance evaluation.** (1) If in connection with the selection or appointment of a judge, any state or federal  
20 agency seeks information or written materials from the commission concerning that judge, information must be  
21 divulged in accordance with procedures prescribed by the commission, including reasonable notice to the judge  
22 affected.

23 (2) If in connection with the assignment of a retired judge to judicial duties, any appropriate  
24 authority seeks information or written materials from the commission about that judge, information must be  
25 divulged in accordance with procedures prescribed by the commission, including reasonable notice to the judge  
26 affected.

27 (3) If in connection to the conduct of a judicial performance evaluation required by [section 5], the  
28 judicial performance evaluation commission established in [sections 3 and 4] seeks information or written

1 materials from the judicial standards commission about that judge, information must be divulged in accordance  
2 with the procedures described by the judicial standards commission, including reasonable notice to the judge  
3 affected."  
4

5 **Section 10.** Section 13-27-401, MCA, is amended to read:

6 **"13-27-401. Voter information pamphlet -- rulemaking.** (1) The secretary of state shall prepare for  
7 printing a voter information pamphlet containing information relevant to the election, including but not limited to  
8 the following information for each statewide ballot issue to be voted on at an election, as applicable:

- 9 (a) ballot title, fiscal statement if applicable, and complete text of the issue;
- 10 (b) the form in which the issue will appear on the ballot;
- 11 (c) arguments advocating approval and rejection of the issue; and
- 12 (d) rebuttal arguments.

13 (2) The secretary of state shall prepare for printing a judicial evaluation information pamphlet  
14 containing for each incumbent judge running in a judicial election or retention election a summary of the judge's  
15 most recent judicial performance evaluation.

16 ~~(2)(3)~~ The ~~pamphlet pamphlets~~ must also contain a notice advising the recipient as to where  
17 additional copies of the ~~pamphlet pamphlets~~ may be obtained.

18 ~~(3)(4)~~ Whenever more than one statewide ballot issue is to be voted on at a single election, the  
19 secretary of state may publish a single pamphlet described in subsection (1) for all of the statewide ballot  
20 issues. The secretary of state may arrange the information in the order that seems most appropriate, but the  
21 information for all statewide ballot issues in the pamphlet must be presented in the same order.

22 ~~(4)(5)~~ The secretary of state may prescribe by rule the format and manner of submission of the  
23 arguments concerning the statewide ballot issue and judicial performance evaluations.

24 (6) For the purposes of this section, "judge" has the meaning provided in [section 2]."  
25

26 - END -